CUSTOMERS: WHO, HOW AND HOW WELL

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

By: Robert Klinoff
Kern County Fire Department
Bakersfield, California

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1996 the Kern County Board of Supervisors delivered a vision statement to County staff. "To create and maintain the most effective, customer-centered county government in the nation."

The problem identified in accomplishing this goal was that Kern County Fire Department (KCFD) personnel did not have a clear understanding of who the customers are, where they fit in planning, and how they should be treated. The purpose of this applied research project was to develop an understanding of who constitutes a "customer," to determine where they fit in the planning process, and to establish a set of "customer service standards." The descriptive research method was used for this project.

The research questions to be answered were: (1) what is the definition of the term "customer?" (2) What is the relationship between customer needs and expectations? (3) What role do customer needs and expectations play in overall planning and service provision? (4) What customer service delivery standards should be set for the KCFD?

Research was conducted utilizing KCFD and other fire service sources, the Kern County Public Library and the Internet. For reference both fire department and business related sources were utilized.

The results of the research pointed out that customers are individuals and groups, defined by age, location, socioeconomic factors and both internal and external to the fire service. Efforts must be made to contact the customers during the planning process to find out what they expect as well as what they need. Also, personnel should treat others as they wish to be treated.

Based on the research several recommendations were identified, including: (1) research which customer groups are located in service areas. (2) Contact these groups and find out what they need and

expect from the fire department, either through customer surveys, personal visits to stakeholder meetings by fire department representatives, or both. (3) Utilize customer input in planning of service provision. (4) Determine customer satisfaction with service delivery through after action surveys. (5) Implement a customer service plan, complete with a customer service manual.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1996 a vision statement was delivered to County staff by the Kern County Board of Supervisors (KCBOS) [Kern County, 1996]. It was short, concise and unambiguous. "To create and maintain the most effective, customer-centered county government in the nation."

The Kern County Fire Department (KCFD) has a mission statement that alludes to the customer service expectations of its members (1996). The mission statement sets many customer-service oriented goals for fire department personnel. The problem identified in accomplishing these goals was that KCFD personnel did not have a clear understanding of who the customers are, where they fit in planning, and how they should be treated.

The purpose of this applied research project was to develop an understanding of who constitutes a "customer," to determine where they fit in the planning process, and to establish a set of "customer service standards." This needed to be accomplished in preparation for developing a customer service manual for the department. This manual will be distributed throughout the department. It will also aid in increasing the level of customer service through influencing the organizational culture by promoting a "customer centered approach." It will be used as a guide for empowering personnel in decision making and to let them know what standard of customer service is desired. This paper was prepared utilizing the descriptive research method.

The research questions to be answered were:

1. What is the definition of the term "customer?"
2. What is the relationship between customer needs and expectations?
3. What role do customer needs and expectations play in overall planning and service provision?
4. What customer service delivery standards should be set for the KCFD?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Over the last several years much attention has been paid to reengineering government in Kern County (R. Elliott, personal communication, April 1, 1999). This effort has affected all departments within County government. The KCBOS handed down a clear, concise and unambiguous directive, in the form of a vision statement, to its department heads. The vision statement reads: "To create and maintain the most effective, customer-centered County government in the nation (KCBOS, Fall, 1996)."

In the reengineering process there were several goals specified for department heads, including the Fire Chief, through the office of the County Administrative Officer (CAO). One of these was a paradigm shift towards customer service in all County department activities (S. Jones, personal communication, March 30, 1999).

As a result of the directives from County staff, the KCFD's Strategic Plan (KCFD, p. 25, 1999a) was amended to include the goal of establishing a "customer service plan and public contact guidebook" for employees. These documents were to include all fire department employees: line, staff and civilian.

Customer service had already been addressed, at least partially, in the mission statement. The mission statement had recently been revised through the establishment of a task force (KCFD, January, 1996). The mission of the KCFD [Appendix A] (1996) is to:

> …protect life and property by providing effective public education, fire prevention, and emergency services. We are committed to proudly serve our community in the safest, most professional and efficient manner. To fulfill our mission we will actively participate in our

> community, serve as role models, and continually seek ways to maximize resources while preserving essential services deemed excellent by our customer. We will constantly evaluate the type of service; method of delivery and equipment needed to perform our duties. Compassion, fairness, and integrity are practiced in all our endeavors. People are our most valuable resource. We are accountable to those we serve. We are responsible for our actions. Pride, the pursuit of excellence, and commitment to customer service are of paramount importance. We will present a positive appearance and attitude.

The customer base is changing as well [Appendix B] (Kern County Network for Children, 1998). Demographic research projects that, not only is the population increasing, it is getting older and changing in its ethnicity. From 1990 to 2005 the population will increase from 550 thousand to over 900 thousand. From 1990 to 2000 the median age will increase from 26.5 years to 31.0 years. From 1990 to 2005 the population will become less white and more Hispanic. At the projected rates the trends are expected to continue long into the future.

The socioeconomic makeup of the County is heavily weighted towards lower income groups (Kern County Board of Trade, 1999). Approximately 70 percent of the population earn less income a year than a new firefighter (Kern County Firefighters Local 1301, 1996).

Kern County

Kern County is approximately 8 thousand square miles in size with a population approaching 700 thousand people (Kern County Board of Trade, 1999). The terrain varies greatly and changes in elevation from 206 to 8,755 feet. It begins in the West on the eastern side of the coastal mountain range with oil production as the main enterprise. The land then flattens out into the floor of the San Joaguin Valley with agriculture, oil refining, and manufacturing, main transportation routes and urban areas.

Moving eastward the terrain then becomes mountainous and stretches over the Southern end of the Sierra Nevada. On the East Side of the County the land turns to desert (Mojave Desert). In this area are two large military bases, China Lake Naval Weapons Center and Edwards Air Force Base (Western landing site of the space shuttle).

Kern County Fire Department

The KCFD provides a wide range of services to the citizens of Kern County and those passing through (KCFD, 1998b). These services include: emergency response to hazardous materials incidents, vehicle accidents, fires, rescues, medical aids, natural disasters, and prevention efforts. Services are provided through 45 fire stations with 45 engine companies and two truck companies. Support facilities include a headquarters, vehicle repair facility, warehouse and dispatch center.

The KCFD provides services to eight of the eleven incorporated cities in Kern County and numerous small communities. It provides services in metropolitan, rural, wildland/urban interface and wildland areas.

Cooperating fire agencies include the California Department of Forestry, eight adjoining county fire departments, three incorporated cities, three prisons, two national forests, two military installations and the Bureau of Land Management. All of the aforementioned participate as partners in joint powers agreements, mutual aid agreements or assistance-by-hire agreements.

The members of the KCFD also work closely with numerous other agencies, including law enforcement (six police departments and the Kern County Sheriffs Department). Prevention efforts are provided to 49 school districts and the Kern County Superintendent of Schools, as well as numerous other groups.

Total requests for service from the fire department have stayed about the same, over the years for which data is available (1993 – 1998), at approximately 29 thousand calls per year (KCFD, 1999b). The requests for medical aid assistance, however, have increased 24 percent and have become the leading demand for emergency services at approximately 55 percent of calls.

With all of the changes in service demand and demographics it is imperative that the members of the KCFD learn how to identify the customer base, adapt to their needs and include them in planning.

The results of this research will assist the KCFD in preparing a customer service document to be presented to all members, regardless of assignment. This document will spell out the customer-centered approach that is to be utilized in external and internal customer contacts. Other fire departments may also find this research useful as they identify their customers and develop their own customer service standards.

This paper was prepared to satisfy an objective contained in the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer course, *Executive Development* (NFA, 1999, p. SM 10-2). The objective is contained in Unit 10 Service Quality/Marketing and reads in part "… develop strategies to improve organizational quality and service standards."

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review includes a look at the issues of customers, planning and customer service from several viewpoints. These include both fire service and business sources.

To provide effective customer service one must first define the term customer. Webster (1973, p. 122) defines customer as: "1 : one that usually buys from or patronizes the same firm." Webster (1986, p. 318) defines customer as: "1 : one that purchases a commodity or service 2 : an individual usually having some specified distinctive trait." The thesaurus in Microsoft Word 7.0 (1995) provides the following synonyms for customer: "buyer, purchaser, shopper, client, patron and consumer." Brunacini (1996a, 52-56) defines customers as: "those who receive our service."

Brunacini (1996b, p.2) further characterizes the customer as:

> Mrs. Smith. She really is not new — actually she has been around as long as we have. It's just in the past we have never very effectively included her in our thoughts, planning, and operations in the special way that makes her our customer. She represents the regular, real live people who call us for help when something burns, or something hurts, or something breaks. A lot of both her immediate and her long-term future depends on how we respond to her call for help, and how we treat her during our time together.

Customers can be seen both as individuals and as groups, in *Strategies For Marketing Your Fire Department Today And Beyond* [SMFDTB] (USFA, 1998, p. 21) customers are described as groups such as "the elderly, residents of older neighborhoods, recent immigrants, individual neighborhoods," and etc. Adams, (1983, p. 41) when speaking about fire safety education, divides groups receiving fire safety education into subgroups including: "preschool children, elementary school children, adolescents, adults, elderly and the handicapped." *Risk Watch* (NFPA, 1998) divides the groups it is focused on into: "Pre K-K, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 and caregivers." IFSTA (1979) refers to groups such as: "preschool, grades 1-3, grades 4-6, Junior High, Senior High, Adults and Older Citizens." The *California Fire Plan* (1996) refers to the customers of the plan as "public stakeholders" and "wildland fire protection providers at the federal, state and local levels."

The focus of this section has been on the "external customer." These customers can be summed up as those who receive our services outside the organization. External customers can be viewed as individuals and as groups. They have always been out there, but have not always been recognized for who they are and what effect they should have on the decision making process. Even Webster has broadened the definition of customer as time has progressed, from what one would deem a regular customer to now even a one-time user of services or special group.

Another group of customers that must be considered in any effort at customer service are the "internal customers." In the text SFMFDTB (1998, p. 21), it states:

> Customer service models also apply to the internal customers of the fire department-the men and women who are the organization. They are customers also, and have needs and expectations that must be met. It is easy at times to think of these men and women as simply "employees" or the "rank and file." However, they are the driving forces of the organization, and without them it would not be possible to deliver any programs or services to the citizens in the community. Without satisfied internal customers the needs of the external customer-the citizens in the community-will not be satisfied. Thus, fire department leaders have two groups of customers.

Among internal customers there are both individuals and groups. Several of these groups were identified within the KCFD (L. Hailey, personal communication, April 23, 1998). They are: labor/management, line/staff, operations, auto shop, support services, dispatch, fire investigation, training, office personnel, fire prevention and administration.

The final report of the Fire Prevention 2000 workshop *Fire Prevention 2000, Challenges and Solutions* (NFPA, FMANA, 1998, pp. 9-10) listed challenges and solutions for fire prevention issues in the next century. Some of these dealt with customer service challenges, both internal and external. They are:

> "Public image, diversity/cultural differences of communities and fire department staff, customer service attitudes needed (in the fire service); reaching the hard to reach population, such as low income; changing role of fire service; parochial mindset; aging customers; get community involved; garnering political support; labor/management issues; changing demographics; changing society values; changing role of fire service; conflicting demands: internal & external; perception vs. realistic expectations; traditions! keep-let go; public priorities and language barriers."

When assessing these challenges one could change the focus from fire prevention to numerous other issues facing the fire service. Customer service is not limited to quick response and proper application of firefighting or medical aid resources. It applies to all areas of fire department activity, both internal and external. There is always an undercurrent of find out what the customer wants and needs and do your best to accommodate them.

When dealing with customers one must determine what they need and what they expect. To determine the relationship between needs and expectations a clear definition of each is a prerequisite.

Webster (1986, p. 790) defines need as: 1 : necessary duty : OBLIGATION, 2 : a lack of something requisite, desirable or useful b : a physiological of psychological requirement for the well-being of an organism. Synonyms in the thesaurus include (Microsoft, 1995): necessity and insufficiency. Expectation is defined as (Webster, 1986, p. 436): 1 : the act or state of expecting : ANTICIPATION. Synonyms for need in the thesaurus include (Microsoft, 1995): anticipation, belief and hope.

Bednarz (1999) states:

What causes a customer to turn angry or hostile? These include feelings of being unappreciated, let down or betrayed. This is often caused by a sales person who is completely unaware of their expectations. This has been documented as a major cause of customer dissatisfaction. The reason for this dissatisfaction is the lack of understanding by both the buyer and the seller regarding the difference between a need and an expectation.

What defines these differences? A need is an urgent requirement of something essential; something people require. Expectations are something customers anticipate will happen. These may include a reduction in costs or an improvement in the quality of their product or services.

You can fulfill needs without satisfying their expectations. You can meet every specification of a specific order and still not meet the customer's expectations.

Needs are on a very basic level and provide for the survival of the customer and their belongings. Expectations include what the customer hopes the outcome will be and are largely affected by how they are treated. The fulfillment of needs does not necessarily mean that the expectations will be fulfilled as well. Needs are the nuts and bolts things that the fire department does. Satisfying expectations include the "nice things" that add value to services.

The importance of identifying the needs and expectations of customers can aid the department in planning the application of its resources. In SFMFDTB (1998, p. 21) it states:

- By learning and meeting the needs of the customers, organizations will help ensure that precious resources are being applied to the areas of the greatest need.
- By serving the internal customers, the fire department administration will improve the effectiveness of each individual and of the overall organization.

- By being a committed advocate for the needs of both the external and internal customers, the fire chief will develop a critical element: the trust of those served.
- Dedicating the resources of a fire service organization to learning and then meeting the needs of the external customers results in a high level of community equity.

Brunacini (1996b, p. 2) states: "I believe she (the customer) should begin to play the central role in both our personal and professional (occupational) mentality and in our organizational service delivery game plan."

Grainger (1998) states:

> Research focused only on existing customer need satisfaction can be very misleading, since this indicates that your customers are only satisfied with what they are currently receiving, and not what they could receive.
>
> What is needed is "customer value management." Customer value management measures the success factors which form the basis on which the customer will evaluate the enterprise's product in relation to that of its competitors. These factors include inter alia, product quality, costs of product or service acquisition and usage, and image in the marketplace. Focusing on these issues, rather than "customer satisfaction", will bridge the gap between what the customers actually receive from the enterprise's product and what the really desire to receive.

Adams (1983, p. 20) recommends that before presenting information, market research be done. This includes: "research your audience's attitudes, characteristics, learning abilities, and preferences."

When it comes to department planning, the customers, both internal and external, must be included. Appy (SFMFDTB, 1996, p. 23) stated: "Odds are good that the best ideas will come from people who both understand the goals of the organization and are working directly with the communities they seek to serve."

In SFMFDTB (1998, p. 23) the citizens of the community are referred to as the "owners of the business." Solutions for customer needs satisfaction identified in *Fire Prevention 2000, Problems and Solutions* were (NFPA, FMANA, 1999, pp. 12-25):

- Planning and vision: Get involved with local, state and national coalitions to review and address common fire and life safety problems to develop a unified focus.
- Change fire department attitudes: Improve labor/management communications by identifying common grounds of mutual interest and start with areas having the greatest crossover interest for both groups.
- Increase public involvement: increase public awareness of the importance of their involvement with fire prevention.
- Build coalitions to help reach your goals: The primary targets for building coalitions can be divided into internal and external groups. For both, the approach is to find compatible organizations and build mutual-benefit relationships. The foundation for building relationships includes treating potential partners as customers and then exhibiting impeccable customer service attitudes.
- Anticipate changing demographics: Fire prevention messages must be targeted to specific audiences so that these messages can be made relevant to specific needs.

Brunacini (1996a, pp. 52-56) in an article about meeting customer needs stated:

"Customer-centered means that customer needs, perceptions, and feelings begin to design and drive how the service delivery system looks and behaves… We have always done the very best we could for our customers, but we haven't spent much time asking them what they really want…simply, we decided what we thought they really needed, delivered that service, and went home."

In order to determine customer needs and expectations it is necessary to make contact with the customers and find out what they really want. Their needs are, in many cases, evident. It is the expectations that take in-depth research to discover.

To provide excellence in customer service, standards must be identified. As a part of the County vision statement several directives were also provided, these are (Reengineering Times, Fall, 1996):

- Maintain and communicate a strategic vision focused on excellence and innovation.
- Respect all employees as vital, effective team members.
- Be effective as defined by the customer.
- Collectively and continuously improve work.
- Measure performance and manage by fact.
- Reward individual and team performance based upon how well we meet organizational goals.

Bednarz (1999) states: "A critical element to successfully managing a customer's expectations is to never over promise and always over perform. A sales person can only build credibility by never promising anything that either they or their company can't deliver."

Cantelme (1995, pp. 1-7) states:

The bottom line must always be “customer service.” Viewing those who receive our services as “customers” is a major cultural change for most of us. Every interaction with the public is an opportunity to positively impact public perception of the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) and its members. We are customers every day in our personal lives. Whether we are going to the store or eating at a restaurant or purchasing a service, we expect quality service in our personal lives. We should provide nothing less in our professional lives. If you witness an occasion of poor customer service, it is your obligation to point it out either at the time or when you get back to the station. If poor customer service is not dealt with at the time, then it becomes the norm. In the internal customers section, the pamphlet states: all members are important. Each of is responsible and accountable for his or her action or inaction. Each of us is unique with our own feelings, ideas, hopes and ways to do things. Our treatment of the public begins with how we treat each other. Each of us has a right to be treated with dignity and respect. This requires involving them in substantive decision making.

Grainger (1998) provides a checklist to ensure that customers receive what they want as a way to succeed. It includes:

- Create a clear, focused and realistic mission statement. This can be accomplished by listing all the things which the business aims to be, as well as those which it does not want to be.
- Define who are your customers and your clients. This leads to what products or services they need or require, how you will provide them and what differentiates you from competitors.

- Present services with clarity and without ambiguity. Image, premises, stationery should present your service well, with attention paid to the human interface - phone and face-to-face contact.
- Encourage good communications skills - including speech, writing, listening and reading and the avoidance of jargon. Communication with customers should show that the business cares about them.
- Provide clear information about new or improved services or products, and respond promptly and helpfully to queries or requests.
- Be approachable. Clients and customers can be intimidated by complex paperwork, strange terminology and procedures.
- Respond to customer's needs, ask them (as well as those who are not your customers) about their requirements, as this can help to define your business.
- Deliver what is promised, high standards may be set, but unless they are implemented, credibility is lost - be honest and transparent.
- Maintain competence at all times. Ensure the business has the ability and capacity to carry out tasks and supply products or services. This competence must extend to all functions in the firm, and across all levels of staff - including senior management.
- Define service standards. Reliability is about having minimum standards, which are consistently exceeded. With intangible services, a brand loyalty must be built on recognized standards of service and consistency, in other words - quality.
- Empathize with customers to fully understand their needs. Identifying closely with customers will encourage understanding of customer expectations and requirements.

- Give your customers peace of mind. Ensure that they are confident that you are in control of their affairs, that documents are safe and that letters and phone calls will be answered promptly, data accessed rapidly and promises fulfilled.
- Be courteous and friendly at all times. Customer service is based on relationships between people, and mutual respect, trust and confidence are based on courtesy and honesty.

> Achieving good customer service is simple and uncomplicated; it involves doing many small things. It must be defined and provided realistically to be credible. It must be a way of life, a habit acted out with sincerity, otherwise it will fail.

Brunacini (1996b, pp. iii-iv), describes standards of customer service as follows:

- Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible customer service to our customers.
- Always be nice - treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.
- Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick/effective/skillful/safe/caring/managed.
- Regard everyone as a customer.
- Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.
- Don't disqualify the customer with your qualifications.
- Basic organizational behavior must become customer centered.
- We must continually improve our customer service performance.

Cantelme (1995, p. 5) references the customer service standards of the L. L. Bean Co., they are: "The customer is: the most important person ever in the company; not dependent on us, we are dependent on him; not an interruption of our work – they are the purpose of it." Cantelme then goes on to state: "The people who call us with their problems are not an interruption to our work. They are our work." The *Phoenix Fire Department Way* (1996, pp. 10-11) specifies that: "PFD members will provide the best possible service to our customers" and that it will be "quick, skillful, caring, standard, professional and resourceful." It also states that: "the PFD will provide the best possible support to our members."

In setting customer service standards the customer must come first. When they call for service they must be treated as the purpose of our existence. Taking care of their immediate needs by putting out the fire or bandaging their wounds is not enough. They need to be treated as people. The importance of treating each other as customers must not be overlooked. One of the most important customer groups is the employees of the fire department.

PROCEDURES

The research procedure used in preparing this paper began with a review of literature available from the Learning Resources Center at the National Fire Academy in March of 1999. Additional literature was reviewed at the Kern County Library. On April 30, 1999 a visit was paid to the Kern County Board of Trade to gather statistical information on Kern County. Utilizing AOL Netfind at AOL.com. a search was made of the Internet on April 27, 1999 under the subject heading of customer service. This search was limited to the first 100 sites of a total of 3,980,539 matches. Documents provided by the KCFD and the CAO were referenced for information on strategic plans, reengineering and statistical data.

Interviews were conducted with Scott Jones, CAO for the County of Kern; Ross Elliott, (Reengineering Facilitator) Special Assistant to the CAO; Daniel G. Clark, Fire Chief, KCFD and

LeCostel Hailey, Deputy Chief, KCFD. These persons were selected for their knowledge of county government, the fire department and the reengineering efforts underway in Kern County.

Limitations

This research paper was limited in several ways. One being that the fire service, as it appears, has only tried to quantify and focus on customer service delivery in the recent past. In researching texts, such as *Managing Fire Services* (1979), customer service does not appear in the index, nor is there any specific mention of it as a priority. Though this is not a particularly recent text, many fire service managers were raised with it as their guidebook and it has been used historically as a source of test questions for upper management positions in the fire service (D. Clark, personal communication, April 30, 1999).

An additional limitation was the review of only the top one hundred sites found during the Internet search. As the sites increased in their assigned number the subject became more remote from the original intent. Had the search subject been modified or stated differently, the site rankings could have changed and a site(s) missed may have been discovered.

From the fire department viewpoint, the subject of customer service is just starting to be addressed in volume. The most prolific source appears to be the PFD and its Chief, Alan Brunacini. Chief Brunacini not only has a text on the market, but is quoted in numerous magazine articles and NFA documents as well. A review of the subject matter presented at the 1999 Fire Rescue West illustrates that customer service, as a topic in the fire service, is becoming much more popular. One of the presentations is titled *Putting the Service Back in Fire Service* (Johnson & Snook, 1999).

Future research should produce many more sources of information with the fire service as the focus. Within the next year an additional source of information, for example, will be the KCFD's *Customer Service Guide*.

Terms

Community equity: similar to placing money in a savings account. The money draws interest and continues to grow. Each deposit increases the organization's financial security in case of an unexpected need or emergency. This account can be described in terms of community good will. When a withdrawal needs to be made there needs to be an amount of good will on deposit to "fund" it.

External customers: Persons in the community that either have received services, will receive services, or may receive services.

Inter alia: Among other things

Internal customers: Those persons that work for the organization. They are more commonly termed employees.

Reengineering: (1) to challenge the fundamental assumptions on which bureaucracies are built and radically redesign these organizations around desired outcomes rather than functions or departments. (2) To take a fresh look at how work is performed and determine if it is accomplishing what is needed in the most efficient manner.

RESULTS

1. What is the definition of the term "customer?"

"Customers" can either be viewed as regular users of a service or one time users (Webster, 1973, 1986). They are often viewed as groups. Based on race, age, grade in school, neighborhood, responsibility, stakeholders or by agency represented (SMFDTB, 1998; Adams, 1983; IFSTA, 1979;

California Fire Plan, 1996). Customers can be further divided into internal and external groupings (SMFDTB, 1998). External customers are those referenced above that do not work for the fire service. The internal customers may be divided by rank and line and staff positions in the fire service (Hailey, 1999). Further divisions of customers are possible until the individual level is reached, the “Mrs. Smith” Brunacini refers to (1996a).

2. **What is the relationship between customer needs and expectations?**

Prior to examining the relationship between a need and an expectation a definition of each is a prerequisite. A need is defined as a “lack of something requisite, a physiological or psychological requisite” (Webster, 1985). Synonyms include: a necessity or insufficiency (Microsoft, 1995). An expectation is defined as “the act or state of expecting, anticipation” (Webster 1985). Synonyms include: “anticipation, belief and hope” (Microsoft, 1975). According to Bednarz (1999) a need is “an urgent requirement of something essential” whereas an expectation is a customer anticipation of what will happen. Customer needs can be satisfied without satisfying their expectations This may lead to dissatisfaction and even hostility in some situations.

3. **What role do customer needs and expectations play in overall planning and service provision?**

Customer needs and expectations must be researched in order to determine what they are. They must become central to planning for provision of services (Brunacini, 1996b). Adams (1983) refers to this process as “market research.” This can help in determining the application of resources to the areas of greatest need (SFMFDTB, 1998).

According to Grainger (1998) the needs and expectations process should not only be focused on after-the-fact surveys. Multiple factors such as: quality, cost, service acquisition, usage and image must be considered. This will aid in determining not just what the customer is receiving, but what they could receive.

To properly perform planning for customer service delivery the customers themselves should be involved as they are “the owners of the business” (SFMFDTB, 1998). Several recommended methods of seeking direct customer involvement are to form or join coalitions, change fire department attitudes, increase public involvement and anticipate changing demographics (NFPA, FMANA, 1999).

4. **What customer service delivery standards should be set for the KCFD?**

In directing department operations towards a “customer centered approach” standards must be identified. Some of the proposed these are to create a vision/mission, respect all employees, be effective, improve work, measure performance/ manage by fact, and reward performance (Reengineering Times, Fall, 1996). Bednarz (1999) recommends under promising and over performing. Cantelme (1995) states that the bottom line must be customer service, with employees treating others as they would wish to be treated and that they are involved in “substantive decision making.” He also demands that poor customer service performance not be ignored.

Grainger (1998) recommends preparing a mission/vision, one that not only states what should be, but what should not be. Grainger and Brunacini (1996b) both list a friendly, caring approach as necessities.

Several of the authors (Cantelme, 1995; Brunacini, 1996b & Grainger, 1998) all recommend that customer service should place the customer first, because they are the important party in the transaction, their needs come first and their expectations should be met as much as possible.

DISCUSSION

The concept of customer service has hit the fire service like a brick through a storefront window with a note attached. The note says that we are not giving people what they expect. We were smug and content within our fire stations (the storefront) providing the services that we thought people needed. When the heroes arrived the fire went out, the bleeding stopped and things got better, at least in most situations. Their equipment was shiny and nicely decorated with gold leaf, some even had chrome rims to better show our pride in ourselves. We wore our uniforms proudly and modeled them for all in the community to see. If the Public needed the firefighters in an emergency they were there 24 - 7 - 365 days a year, Thanksgiving and Christmas included. They could be counted on, even at risk of their own lives. They sincerely thought that was enough. Now, as it turns out, it wasn’t. Firefighters are constantly reminded what happens to organizations that fail to change with customer demand. They disappear or are replaced. “Remember the dinosaurs” is the new rallying cry.

As an attempt to improve customer service is made, several things must be kept in mind. One of the foremost is the cost. When responding to electrical plug fires it used to be accepted practice to bury the ax head in the wall to make a hole to check for extension. The new way of doing things is to get the battery operated saber saw from the engine and make a nice, neat, easily patched hole. An ax has a life span of 100 years or more in some departments. Fire departments already have them, they are low tech and nearly indestructible. A battery operated saber saw is expensive and needs to be replaced on a regular basis. It has a battery that must be kept charged and blades that must be replaced. The ax serves many purposes; the saber saw only a few. The budget and the engines can only carry so much equipment before one or both are overloaded.

The fire service has prided itself on being able to take on almost any situation and make a positive difference in the outcome. Evidenced by such statements as “Any job, anywhere, any time” (Klinoff, 1997, p. v). They may not have always made their customers feel good, but at least they stopped whatever harm was occurring, either to people, property or the environment.

Part of the reason for the emphasis on customer service may well be that the fire service has shifted much of its focus from putting out fires (conserving property) to provision of medical aid (saving lives). The fire department has always gone by the axiom of saving lives and property, but this was used in the context of fighting fires to save lives. In fact, fire departments do not face a significant life safety risk at most fires and are saving inanimate objects. These objects have no emotions and do not react if treated without regard to their feelings.

In any given community, the fire department is still a monopoly. They are not competing directly with other providers of their service. They are, however, competing with other agencies for tax dollars. As fire departments are forced to justify their value to the communities they serve it is only natural that they would look to the business world to learn how to compete

Answers to research questions.

1. What is the definition of the term “customer?”

In the broadest terms, customers are anyone, both internally and externally, that the fire department provides a service to or comes into contact with (Webster). According to most of the sources (Brunacini; SFMFDTB; NFPA, FMANA; NFPA; Adams; IFSTA) external customers include the multitude of socioeconomic, ethnic, age, grade level, and etc. groups in the community. External customers also include professional groups (e.g., other fire departments and emergency service providers) (California Fire Plan). External customers must also be viewed as individuals, either within or without a group. These are the "Mrs. Smith's" (Brunacini).

Internal customers include the personnel in the various bureaus, support functions and operations personnel within the fire department (Hailey). They must not be overlooked when considering who the customers are (Brunacini; Cantelme).

2. **What is the relationship between customer needs and expectations?**

What customers need is the basis for the development of the modern fire service. They need protection from fire and other natural disasters. They need medical assistance in emergency and non-emergency situations.

They can and should expect that these services will be delivered in a professional manner. What that professional manner is will be discussed in question 4.

As Bednarz states, expectations follow directly from needs. Services could be delivered in a brusque and deliberate manner (e.g., we came, we saw, we put it out, we left). They should be delivered in a kind and caring manner (Brunacini & Cantelme). The fire is out, as many of your belongings have been saved as possible, you have been found a place to stay and you will be checked on later to ensure that you are doing okay. One thing to be kept in mind is that as expectations are met they quite possibly will rise.

"To always under promise and over fulfill" is a difficult mission for the modern fire service (Bednarz). Budget constraints do not allow the unlimited resources that will totally place a person who has suffered a disaster back on their feet. In some situations, where staffing is relatively low and stations are widely spaced, personnel must ready themselves and their equipment for the next response and are not always capable of relying on the next due company to cover for them while they provide follow up care.

3. **What role do customer needs and expectations play in overall planning and service provision?**

The research for this paper indicated that one group in the fire service has been very concerned with the who, what and how of customers for some time. This group is those working in fire prevention. One can go back several years and find sources that indicate the planning of service provision must begin with a look at who will be receiving the service and center it on their needs (Adams; IFSTA).

Before customer centered planning can be accomplished customer needs and expectations must be assessed. This can be accomplished through community meetings, group sessions and surveys, as well as one-on-one contact (SFMFDTB; NFPA, FMANA).

Customers needs and expectations may not necessarily be what the fire department thinks they are. After the fact surveys of customer satisfaction serve a purpose, to determine how well the mission was accomplished when services were provided. They do not discover what could have been done (Grainger). When hard decisions need to be made to apply scarce resources to get the most for each dollar the customer must be included in the decision making process, even to the point of playing a central role in decision making (SFMFDTB). Without their input, firefighters may very well choose to put chrome rims on the engine rather than use the money to purchase an automatic electronic defibrillator. There is nothing wrong with pride in your equipment, but chrome rims serve no real purpose.

4. **What customer service delivery standards should be set for the KCFD?**

In the KCFD, attention to customer service has always been deemed a priority. The mission statement grew out of a directive from the Board of Supervisors, but was not a major paradigm shift for most members of the department. Personnel did what they did out of a commitment to others. It was not quantified, nor specified, but it was provided. Now that we have writers that have put this commitment into easily understood catch phrases such as: "be nice, treat everyone as you would like to be treated, put customers first, they are the boss" (Brunacini; Cantelme) it may be more easily communicated to old hands and new recruits alike.

In essence, the focus of pride in the KCFD must change from how well the personnel performed on the last "good fire" to how well they treat the internal and external customers. This will not be easy and will take some time. Personnel have been selected and trained for their ability to perform in stressful situations, not their ability to empathize with someone in pain, whether it is physical or emotional. The effective management and mitigation of emergencies is still a top priority, it is just the change of focus on how it is done that needs fine-tuning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Utilizing demographic data, research which customer groups are located in service areas.
2. Contact these groups and find out what they need and expect from the fire department, either through customer surveys, personal visits to stakeholder meetings by fire department representatives, or both.
3. Utilize customer input in planning of service provision.
4. Determine customer satisfaction with service delivery through after action surveys.
5. Implement a customer service plan complete with a customer service manual.

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APPENDIX A

KERN COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

MISSION STATEMENT

"The Kern County Fire Department is dedicated to protecting life and property by providing effective public education, fire prevention and emergency services. We are committed to proudly serving our community in the safest, most professional, and efficient manner."

To fulfill our mission we will actively participate in our community, serve as role models, and continually seek ways to maximize resources while preserving essential services deemed excellent by our customer. We will constantly evaluate the type of service, method of delivery and equipment needed to perform our duties.

- Safety first is not a commitment, it is a way of life;
- Compassion, fairness, and integrity are practiced in all our endeavors;
- People are our most valuable resource;
- We are accountable to those we serve;
- We are responsible for our actions;
- Pride, the pursuit of excellence, and commitment to customer service are of paramount importance;
- We will promote the use of quality principles, concepts and technologies;
- We will present a positive appearance and attitude;

Our value to the community is measured by the fulfillment of these commitments.

APPENDIX B

TABLE 1.1
KERN COUNTY
TOTAL POPULATION BY YEAR AND RACE/ETHNICITY
1990-2000

	1990	%	1995	%	2000	%
White	340,892	62.7	366,570	55.6	436,870	54.5
Black	28,851	5.3	39,410	6.0	46,980	5.9
Other	21,739	4.0	28,390	4.3	32,770	4.1
Hispanic Origin	151,995	28.0	224,840	34.1	285,370	35.6
Total	543,477	100.0	659,210	100.0	801,990	100.0

TABLE 1.2
KERN COUNTY
TOTAL POPULATION BY YEAR AND SELECTED AGE GROUPS
1990-2000

	1990	1995	2000
Under 5 years	52,257	68,830	77,480
5-9 Years	51,926	59,060	74,910
10-14 Years	43,726	56,110	65,500
15-19 Years	38,327	49,860	62,680
20-24 Years	38,032	48,080	56,550
25-34 Years	99,740	106,700	109,780
35-44 Years	78,288	101,060	124,550
45-54 Years	49,288	64,830	90,510
55-64 Years	39,251	42,860	60,070
65-74 Years	32,528	36,120	44,920
75 Years and Over	20,114	25,690	35,040
Total	543,477	659,200	801,990
Median Age	28.9	28.8	31.0

TABLE 1.3
KERN COUNTY
ESTIMATED POPULATION BY AGE, RACE/ETHNICITY AND YEAR
1990 - 2005

Year	Total Pop.	White	Black	Other	Hispanic Origin	Under 18 Pop.	White	Black	Other	Hispanic Origin
1990	549,800	345,779	29,423	20,835	153,763	173,885	93,491	10,620	6,330	63,444
1991	574,590	349,800	31,670	22,500	170,620	183,140	95,080	11,090	6,890	70,080
1992	595,190	354,390	33,860	23,600	183,340	191,150	97,060	11,600	7,250	75,240
1993	616,040	358,760	35,220	25,100	196,960	199,200	98,420	12,110	7,670	81,000
1994	641,850	363,680	38,050	26,720	213,400	270,780	99,660	12,630	8,160	87,330
1995	659,200	366,570	39,410	28,380	224,840	214,650	100,480	13,110	8,680	92,380
1996	688,600	381,940	40,910	29,260	236,490	223,650	103,670	13,590	8,920	97,470
1997	717,680	396,690	42,490	30,130	248,370	232,330	106,580	14,060	9,140	102,550
1998	746,340	410,900	43,950	31,010	260,480	240,400	109,000	14,520	9,330	107,550
1999	774,860	424,750	45,420	31,890	272,800	247,970	111,000	14,980	9,500	112,490
2000	801,980	436,870	46,980	32,760	285,370	255,880	112,910	15,520	9,680	117,770
2001	825,020	444,690	48,520	33,650	298,160	262,340	113,530	16,050	9,850	122,910
2002	848,300	452,490	50,080	34,540	311,190	269,260	114,360	16,000	10,050	128,250
2003	870,770	459,370	51,510	35,430	324,460	275,810	114,780	17,070	10,240	133,720
2004	893,560	466,250	53,010	36,340	337,960	282,480	115,240	17,540	10,410	139,290
2005	916,600	473,120	54,520	37,250	351,710	289,590	115,970	17,990	10,620	145,010

TABLE 1.4
KERN COUNTY
PERCENT ESTIMATED POPULATION BY AGE, RACE/ETHNICITY AND YEAR
1990 - 2005

Year	Total Pop. %	White %	Black %	Other %	Hispanic Origin %	Under 18 Pop. %	White %	Black %	Other %	Hispanic Origin %
1990	100.0	62.9	5.4	3.8	28.0	100.0	53.8	6.1	3.6	36.5
1991	100.0	60.9	5.5	3.9	29.7	100.0	51.9	6.1	3.8	38.3
1992	100.0	59.5	5.7	4.0	30.8	100.0	50.8	6.1	3.8	39.4
1993	100.0	58.2	5.7	4.1	32.0	100.0	49.4	6.1	3.9	40.7
1994	100.0	56.7	5.9	4.2	33.2	100.0	48.0	6.1	3.9	42.0
1995	100.0	55.6	6.0	4.3	34.1	100.0	46.8	6.1	4.0	43.0
1996	100.0	55.5	5.9	4.2	34.3	100.0	46.4	6.1	4.0	43.6
1997	100.0	55.3	5.9	4.2	34.6	100.0	45.9	6.1	3.9	44.1
1998	100.0	55.1	5.9	4.2	34.9	100.0	45.3	6.0	3.9	44.7
1999	100.0	54.8	5.9	4.1	35.2	100.0	44.8	6.0	3.8	45.4
2000	100.0	54.5	5.9	4.1	35.6	100.0	44.1	6.1	3.8	46.0
2001	100.0	53.9	5.9	4.1	36.1	100.0	43.3	6.1	3.8	46.9
2002	100.0	53.3	5.9	4.1	36.7	100.0	42.5	6.2	3.7	47.6
2003	100.0	52.8	5.9	4.1	37.3	100.0	41.6	6.2	3.7	48.5
2004	100.0	52.2	5.9	4.1	37.8	100.0	40.8	6.2	3.7	49.3
2005	100.0	51.6	5.9	4.1	38.4	100.0	40.0	6.2	3.7	50.1